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ABSTRACT

Richard Spady has identified 10 general theories through research in the field of administrative theory. Three of the theories are stressed in this paper. First, the theory of learning that uplifts the importance of the Socratic method is stressed, followed by a reflection on the research of Arthur W. Combs that defined the characteristics of good and poor teachers. Third, the Zeitgeist principle is discussed. The paper describes one application of these theoretical considerations in the democractic strategic plan implemented at the Bellevue School District (Washington State). It took 2 years to implement the process in a district with a 36-year history of commitment to the notion of participative decision-making. The communication processes developed by Spady and adapted by the Bellevue School District offers a means of engaging large numbers of people in a dialogue without the usual dissatisfaction expressed by participants of large meetings. Appended are five references, sample responses from the "many-to-many opinionnaire," and a sample summary of opinionnaire responses and comments. (SI)

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIC PLANNING

Democratic Strategic Planning in Schools Through Inclusive Small-Group Discussions Using Many-to-Many Communication Technology

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Applicable Key Words: Futures research, organization development, administrative theory, democratic process, strategic planning, school-centered decision making, small-group discussion, many-to-many communication, PLAN forum, Fast Forum®, Opinionnaire®, Viewspaper®.

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIC PLANNING

Theoretical Implications

Richard Spady has been engaged in research in pure and applied social science as president of the Forum Foundation since 1970. The foundation is a non-profit, religious-educational research corporation of Washington State doing research in the field of Administrative Theory which can be considered as a subset of Organization Development. Administrative Theory is defined as: the search for those dynamics that tend to move organizations and institutions universally toward solving their problems and with anticipating or adapting to changes in their internal or external environments.

Spady has identified ten general theories[1] in his research: (1) the basic attitude (an implied administrative imperative), (2) the theory of learning (the source of individual creativity), (3) the theory of leadership (the source of organizational creativity), (4) the theory of authority (the source of organizational power), (5) the theory of politics (the source of organizational collaboration and action), (6) the self-fulfilling prophecy (the generator of theories and determinant of capacity), (7) the administrative process--defined, (8) the helping professions--defined, (9) the Zeitgeist principle and

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[1] "Theory" is used here to mean "theoretical discussion" in the common usage of the term rather than the more precise concept used by physical and social scientists.

communication--defined, and (10) the "Natural Factors in Organizations" (role assignments performed spontaneously). For purposes of this paper, we stress three of the theories. The first is the theory of learning which uplifts the importance of the Socratic Method. In the process of facing problems and answering questions posed, an individual not only learns something new, but literally becomes "someone new" psychologically speaking. Second is the importance of the research of Dr. Arthur W. Combs, who began nearly 30 years ago to research the characteristics of good and poor teachers. We believe what he actually found in the "helping professions" as he defined them were the characteristics of good and poor leaders--of whom teachers, counselors, ministers, and administrators (the largest group and the focus of our research) are a part. Third, the "Zeitgeist Principle" which stems from the other theories which precede it and states: "No human organization or institution will function properly, the way most people want it to function, unless it has a participative, routine, reliable, viable, feedback communication system. Most organizations and institutions today have no such system." [Spady and Bell, 1989]

The essence of 20 years' research in social science for us has been the growing realization that big meetings, which are often also at remote distances, are the Achilles' heel of the democratic process which undergirds our organizational, institutional, and societal culture. Most people today do not have time to go to such meetings. Besides they remember the last time they went; the sheer logistics are such that usually only a few people can speak and most people can only listen.

Our research then has led us to the importance of small discussion groups to achieve organizational and institutional feedback. But because there are so many small groups, the problem has become "how" to do it, i.e., how can people in many small groups relate to each other as a whole.

The Forum Foundation has been experimenting with the Fast Forum® technique in the Seattle area since 1970. The Church Council of Greater Seattle has provided the arena of (1) people and (2) organizations in which to conduct this "futures research" over the years that Spady has served there as a member of the Council's volunteer staff. We have defined futures research, not as forecasting, but rather as the search for those dynamics which tend to improve the sociological and technological future, i.e., administrative theory. [Spady and Bell, 1989]

While sound theoretical views are the foundation of every discipline, they are not enough. One must develop techniques and processes able to effect the theories, i.e., the Fast Forum® technique with its new statistical symbols. But even that is not enough. One must still develop working models to fine tune and adapt the theories and techniques which have evolved. This we have been doing since 1976. A new communication technology has evolved from these new theories of administration which we call Many-to-Many communication. The computer program is currently being adapted to public access at the University of Washington Academic Computing Services to effect this. (It is free to University of Washington students and faculty for scholarly purpose and available to other at nominal cost.)

Today we have essentially One-to-One and One-to-Many communication in theory and practice. That is, one person sends a message to one other person by letter or (electronically) to one other person or many other persons simultaneously. Many-to-Many communication sends "messages" among many people using an objective "Opinionnaire®" which is based on participation theory which, in turn, is based on administrative theory. This is in contradistinction to the traditional random-sample, objective questionnaire which is based on statistical theory which, in turn, is based on mathematical theory. Different rules apply. Unfortunately, those differences are not widely known today even among scholars. But we are all learning.

The Planning Long-range Assessment Network (PLAN Forum) model is currently being adapted for use in policy research among diverse groups for the first time in a large public school system, Bellevue Public Schools, which is a large Seattle suburban district. The PLAN Forum allows people to meet in small groups of eight to twelve persons, listen to an audio or cassette tape from a leader, discuss the implications of the issues, and respond individually on Fast Forum® Response Sheets. These can show any demographics desired, objective responses to 50 questions, and will also allow for written comments. The sheets are optically scanned using NCS scanners and tabulated into finished profile reports at the University of Washington Academic Computing Services. The data generated are diagnostic with results often summarized in a "Viewspaper®." Reports are valid for the people participating. They are just as valid as letters or telephone messages sent to leader/representatives from constituents, as testimony given at large public hearings and so forth (none of which are necessarily statistically relevant of the body politic at large). Theoretically with better diagnosis of organizational and

institutional problems will come better decisions. Also, as people are enabled to participate more viably in the decisions that affect their lives, "authority" begins to flow upward from constituents to their leaders who are, in turn, enabled to govern more effectively.

Dr. Jacob Bronowski, author of the classic book and 1973 television series, "The Ascent of Man," perhaps has best captured the major problem facing mankind, the magnitude of that problem, and its solution in the following short philosophical statement: "[There are those who are] in love with the aristocracy of the intellect. And that is a belief that can only destroy civilization as we know it. If we are anything, we must be a democracy of the intellect. We must not perish by the distance between people and government, between people and power." [Bronowski, 1973]

We hope the administrative theories, PLAN forum, and other models developed by the Forum Foundation to enhance citizen participation will be of help to this problem of community and civilization building.

Now let us turn to a more detailed consideration of one application of these theoretical considerations.

An Application of Democratic Strategic Planning

In 1952, citizens and staff of the Bellevue School District worked with faculty and graduate students from Washington State University to develop a long-range plan for the district. That plan called for high levels of participation by professional staff and parents in decision making concerning programs and

services within the district. Thirty-six years later the district continues to struggle with how to achieve the quality and quantity of participation needed for effective decisions. The community has grown from a small bedroom suburb of Seattle, with fewer than 10,000 residents, to an emerging urban area with a population of approximately 100,000. As this growth has occurred, the schools have lost their central place in community life. Whereas nearly 70 percent of the population in the 1950's was associated with the schools, now less than 30 percent have a direct connection.

At the same time residents are becoming less directly affiliated with schools, parents are less available to participate in the meetings which have been the hall mark of small-town democracy in this country. Pressured by such factors as long commutes, single-parent status, and both parents working away from the home, parents resist attending one more meeting in which they will be "talked to." Faculty, tired from brow beating by everyone from the national media to "experts" from higher education, greet invitations to participate in another round of typical involvement with considerable suspicion. Others not directly affiliated with the school express frustrations that schools are not accomplishing more with vehemence equaled only by their assertions that no one will listen to them if they try to make a difference.

This history of seeking strong participative decision making and shifting community and staff responses to opportunities for involvement provide the setting for school district application of communication strategies developed by Richard Spady of the Forum Foundation.

Bellevue has been applying these approaches in its effort to develop consensus concerning a policy delineating the processes to be used for decision making concerning its educational program. [See discussion of theoretical basis for changes, in Sirotnik and Clark, 1988; Sirotnik, 1988; Clark, 1988] The contribution made by Spady's communication technologies can be best appreciated if one considers that alternatives available. Note how each of them fails to solve one or more aspects of the problems identified above.

One traditional approach would be to have the Board of Directors hold hearings concerning what policy it wants to adopt. One large meeting could be held to allow people to testify as to what should be included and, later, a meeting could be held to allow people to testify concerning their reactions to a proposed policy. A variation of this approach which is not uncommon is to attempt to gain broader exposure of the hearings by having several sessions in different geographical regions. In each case the format tends to be similar with few participants attending because they know that they will have little opportunity for in-depth comment or with large numbers showing up to demonstrate that they are behind a particular interest group's point of view. In the latter case, frustration among individuals is often escalated rather than relieved by the opportunity and, in any event, the Board conducting the hearings is unable to know much about the basis for the views being represented by the orchestrated demonstration.

Another familiar alternative designed to represent "participation" is the creation of a "blue ribbon" committee or a "task force" made up of representatives of the important constituent groups. Sometimes such involvement is used in conjunction with other approaches. While individuals on

such panels may be able to express different perspectives during group sessions, they seldom are in a position to have the kinds of interactions with their constituencies that would really enable them to be representative. Or, to put it another way, most staff and community members still feel left out even though they are told a "committee" has studied the matter.

A third alternative would be to use conventional public opinion polling. Typical opinion polling processes fail to give people the ability to object to the questions being asked and to indicate in other ways their feelings about a subject. To facilitate processing, they collect brief, bipolar or multiple choice responses. These responses can help predict outcomes of votes, which television shows will be most watched, or even whether a particular group is apt to approve of a general policy initiative. However, must such systems are not very informative about why any individual holds a particular view. With properly constructed survey instruments and with the use of proper sampling techniques, such polling will reveal what the population thinks. Unfortunately, although the results may accurately reflect opinions, the population at large does not feel consulted and the commitment that is needed to carry out a decision is lacking.

Another option which could be used would be to ask numerous representatives to meet with small groups of people. For example, principals could meet with small groups of parents and staff, and reports the results of their meetings to some central data gatherer. This system has the advantage of personalization lacking in many large-group approaches. It has several disadvantages. Different principals (or other facilitators) will describe problems differently and, even if that problem is offset by scripting and rehearsing the

facilitators, those who record the meetings will be listening through sufficiently different filters that the people present at the meetings might or might not recognize the report as reflecting their discussion.

Instead of the alternatives above, what Bellevue needed was an approach which would accomplished the following:

1. Provide the advantages of representative groups in the development of a policy.

2. Enable the district to provide information to the broader community prior to seeking opinions.

3. Enable community and staff to informally discuss issues in small groups prior to providing feedback to the district.

4. Enable individuals to (a) express their opinions, (b) share their reactions to the questions they were being asked, and (c) offer alternatives.

5. Expedite processing of group opinions so that revisions could be made in policy proposals without too much time lapse and so that individuals sharing opinions would be aware of how their views matched those of the broader community.

6. Permit the reiteration of the discussion-data gathering process until it was evident that the vast majority of those contacted (a) had their

minds made up on critical issues dealt with in the policy (i.e., were polarized) and (b) were in agreement with the basic provisions of the policy.

The specific procedures used matched these requirements. They utilized specific communication "technologies" developed by Richard Spady and some of the more common consensus development techniques.

The work began with the use of an "opinionnaire," the format and procedures for which were developed by Spady. The responses provided the district with information regarding the opinion of its administrative staff on a number of key issues concerning school-centered decision making. The data from this instrument were shared with an administrative committee representing each major classification of administrator in the district. The members of this committee next interviewed parents, teachers and principals participating in school councils in each school. The results of these interviews and the original "opinionnaire" were then shared with a policy development committee that included three parents, three teachers, three students and three principals. [Sample pages from this survey and subsequent data-gathering efforts are included as Exhibit A.]

The policy development committee visited several school districts in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest, heard reports from several individuals who had participated in national conferences on related issues and met with the School Board in small-group discussion sessions. In these sessions with the Board, the policy committee sought information about Board members' views on critical issues. Next, a video tape was prepared to be used to share with faculty and

parent groups some of the findings of district representatives as they visited other school districts engaged in similar activities.

Meanwhile, the education effort continued as a panel involving School Board members, principals, education association representatives, PTA leaders and central office officials made presentations to parent and staff groups.

Prior to the start of a school year approximately 300 parents, teachers and administrators joined in a series of small-group study sessions reviewing a number of activities under way in efforts to strengthen the school district. The fourth draft of a proposed policy on school-centered renewal was shared with participants in this session. This draft had been developed out of conversations by the policy committee during the preceding school year. Those in attendance were told that they would have a chance to provide feedback concerning that policy draft later in the fall.

Next, the superintendent prepared a ten-minute video-taped message indicating the purposes of school district renewal efforts and the rationale for the approach to decision making represented by the fourth draft of the policy. At each school, parent, teacher and student members of the school council (called the Program Delivery Council or PDC) were to read the policy in advance, view the tape, engage in an activity known as "a day in the sun, " discuss the policy draft, and then complete the "opinionnaire."

Results of the "opinionnaires" were tabulated quickly using the University of Washington Computer Center. A "viewspaper" providing summary responses to questions and summarizing individual comments of respondents was then shared

with staff and community throughout the district, and with the policy committee and School Board members.

The policy committee then prepared a fifth draft. The earlier feedback had shown strong agreement on the general approach to decision making being advocated but revealed a variety of concerns about specific aspects of the fourth draft of the policy. As the policy committee began its follow-up, it committed to increased parental and non-parent community responses and to securing an indication of whether the new draft was more agreeable to the staff.

The policy committee met with parent, teacher and administrator representatives from each school and worked through the "many-to-many" process with them because there were some indications that schools had not all followed the complete process during the review of the fourth draft. Particular attention was given to practicing the "day in the sun" process so that these people could see the importance of allowing each PDC member to make a comment after hearing the background information and prior to the beginning of general discussion.

The school PDCs were then asked to repeat the process with a sixth draft and the responses from that review were again processed by the University of Washington Computer Center. In addition, background information was shared with a group of 150 key communicators identified by the district's Public Information Office, and they were asked to respond to the same "opinionnaire" which had been used by the school PDCs.

It is expected that the results of this round of feedback will show substantial agreement with the policy. After several minor adjustments, the policy committee should be able to recommend the seventh draft to the School Board. After two public hearings, the Board will adopt the policy confident that it represents a strong consensus of involved community, staff and students.

The process described has taken two full years, and this was in a district with a 36-year history of commitment to the notion of participative decision making advocated in the policy under review. Obviously this elaborate involvement is not practical for every issue considered by a school district. However, to the extent the question is one about which consensus is needed in order to achieve effective implementation, the strategies employed should produce satisfactory results. Other less formal processes have been developed by Spady and colleagues to secure quicker responses.

A great deal is known about how to develop consensus in small discussion groups. Much less information is available about how to develop agreement among large groups of people. The communication processes developed by Spady and adapted by the Bellevue School District offer promise of a means of engaging large numbers of people in a dialogue without the usual dissatisfaction expressed by participants of large meetings. Certainly in this one instance they have been extremely helpful in developing a broad consensus among patrons and employees of the school district.

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EXHIBIT A: Sample Responses from Many-to-Many Opinionnaire

Many-To-Many Communications

-----Fast Forum (R) and Viewspaper (R)-----
Attitudinal Profile Report OCTOBER 1988

BELLEVUE SCHOOL DISTRICT OPINIONNAIRE(R) DIVISION/SCHOOL PROFILE

Disclaimer clause: The purpose of these informal reports is to communicate ideas, issues, and problems among people as a platform for future, meaningful discussions of concerns. Participants are assisted in becoming aware of their own beliefs as well as of those intellectual and moral beliefs of others at a point in time--the Zeitgeist.
The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the individuals who participated and do not necessarily represent the official views of the the parent group or sponsoring organization. Nor will the views expressed necessarily represent those of the same participants at a later period of time; as humans we each have the ability to receive new information, consider it, and change. -- The Forum Foundation

*Legend: Example of the Polarization-Consensus Rating for yes/no questions.

PC Rating

"Polarization Rating" (75% -- 80) "Consensus Rating"

A measure of the WEIGHT given an idea or question by the people participating. The polarization rating is the percentage of people participating who answered yes or no (excluding those who abstained or objected).

Thus: A polarization rating of 100% means everyone participating answered yes or no. A rating of 50% means half answered yes or no. A rating of 0% means no one answered yes or no (thus, everyone abstained or objected).

A measure of the OPINION given by those people answering yes or no. The consensus rating is the percentage of people answering yes of those who answered yes or no, i.e., % positive response (excluding those who abstained or objected).

Thus: A consensus rating above 50 means the people answering favored the idea--up to 100 which means unanimously favorable. A rating of 50 means they were split--"fifty-fifty" with half yes and half no. A rating below 50 means they were against the idea, down to zero which means they were unanimously against it.

Read the PC rating cited above as "75% had 80 consensus" meaning: 75% of those persons participating were polarized and answered either yes or no. Therefore, of those persons who answered yes or no, 80 out of 100 answered yes (thus 20 out of 100 answered no). The Polarization-Consensus Rating, therefore, allows accurate and easy comparison of responses between different-sized groups and also total responses.

For further insights on the kinds of questions people feel able to answer within a grouping of related questions, questions can be ranked and reordered by polarization rating showing the weight. That is, both yes/no and multiple-choice questions can be ranked and reordered by the percentage of people who answered the question with clear yes/no or multiple-choice responses--excluding those who abstained or objected. This magnifies the analysis of the data to better resolve the social attitudes of those who participated, i. e., "Social Resolving Power."

Computer program (C) U.C.C. 1988 Forum Foundation.

04-01 (Original Question No. 3)
DOES THE PROPOSED POLICY DEFINE "SUFFICIENT CONSENSUS" CLEARLY ENOUGH?

Total	Yes	No	Abstain+Objection		PC Rating *	Category
194	49%	43%	5%	3%	(93%-- 53)	ELEM SCHOOL
59	47%	49%	3%	0%	(97%-- 49)	MIDDLE SCHOOL
93	39%	51%	4%	6%	(89%-- 43)	HIGH SCHOOL
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	P/PS CENTRAL STAFF
48	42%	38%	17%	4%	(79%-- 53)	OTHER CENTR STAFF
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	OTHER THAN ABOVE
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	46%	45%	6%	3%	(91%-- 50)	Total

05-01 (Original Question No. 17)
IS THERE A REAL DANGER IN GROUPS BEING DOMINATED BY A FEW "OBSTINATE" MEMBERS WHEN THE GROUPS ARE TRYING TO REACH CONSENSUS?

Total	Yes	No	Abstain+Objection		PC Rating *	Category
194	47%	41%	8%	4%	(88%-- 53)	ELEM SCHOOL
59	61%	32%	5%	2%	(93%-- 65)	MIDDLE SCHOOL
93	45%	49%	5%	0%	(95%-- 48)	HIGH SCHOOL
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	P/PS CENTRAL STAFF
48	73%	19%	8%	0%	(92%-- 80)	OTHER CENTR STAFF
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	OTHER THAN ABOVE
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	52%	39%	7%	2%	(91%-- 57)	Total

06-01 (Original Question No. 7)
WILL SCHOOOL CENTERED DECISION MAKING AND RENEWAL INCREASE THE POWER OF PARENTS?

Total	Yes	No	Abstain+Objection		PC Rating *	Category
194	78%	12%	7%	2%	(91%-- 86)	ELEM SCHOOL
59	86%	8%	5%	0%	(95%-- 91)	MIDDLE SCHOOL
93	76%	14%	9%	1%	(90%-- 85)	HIGH SCHOOL
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	P/PS CENTRAL STAFF
48	65%	13%	15%	8%	(77%-- 84)	OTHER CENTR STAFF
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	OTHER THAN ABOVE
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	77%	12%	8%	2%	(90%-- 86)	Total

07-01 (Original Question No. 5)
IS THE PURPOSE OF THE PROPOSED POLICY CLEARLY STATED?

Total	Yes	No	Abstain+Objection		PC Rating *	Category
194	68%	22%	7%	3%	(90%-- 75)	ELEM SCHOOL
59	69%	17%	8%	5%	(86%-- 80)	MIDDLE SCHOOL
93	62%	31%	5%	1%	(94%-- 67)	HIGH SCHOOL
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	P/PS CENTRAL STAFF
48	44%	38%	13%	6%	(81%-- 54)	OTHER CENTR STAFF
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	OTHER THAN ABOVE
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	(0%-- 0)	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	64%	25%	7%	3%	(89%-- 72)	Total

32-02 (Original Question No. 27)
THE PROPOSED POLICY ADEQUATELY SPEAKS TO THE NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN DECISION MAKING.
(A) STRONGLY AGREE,(B) AGREE,(C) NEUTRAL,(D) DISAGREE,(E) STRONGLY DISAGREE

Total	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	Abstain	Objection	Category
191	18%	36%	15%	20%	5%	4%	3%	TEACHER
83	12%	33%	14%	29%	6%	5%	1%	PARENT
60	15%	37%	7%	25%	13%	3%	0%	ADMINISTRATOR
9	22%	33%	11%	11%	11%	11%	0%	STUDENT
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	NON-PARENT/PATRON
41	15%	27%	15%	27%	5%	7%	5%	OTHER
10	40%	10%	0%	20%	10%	10%	10%	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	16%	34%	13%	23%	7%	5%	2%	Total

33-02 (Original Question No. 32)
SCHOOLS SHOULD NOT REPLACE PRINCIPALS WITH COMMITTEES.
(A) STRONGLY AGREE,(B) AGREE,(C) NEUTRAL,(D) DISAGREE,(E) STRONGLY DISAGREE

Total	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	Abstain	Objection	Category
191	46%	29%	7%	6%	3%	5%	4%	TEACHER
83	59%	28%	2%	2%	2%	2%	4%	PARENT
60	68%	23%	2%	2%	2%	3%	0%	ADMINISTRATOR
9	56%	22%	11%	0%	0%	11%	0%	STUDENT
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	NON-PARENT/PATRON
41	66%	24%	5%	0%	0%	0%	5%	OTHER
10	50%	20%	10%	0%	0%	0%	20%	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	55%	27%	5%	4%	2%	4%	4%	Total

34-02 (Original Question No. 35)
IN THE EVENT A SCHOOL COMMUNITY CANNOT REACH SUFFICIENT CONSENSUS ON A SPECIFIC DECISION, THE PRINCIPAL SHOULD MAKE AN INTERIM DECISION AND CONTINUE TO WORK FOR SUFFICIENT CONSENSUS.
(A) STRONGLY AGREE,(B) AGREE,(C) NEUTRAL,(D) DISAGREE,(E) STRONGLY DISAGREE

Total	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	Abstain	Objection	Category
191	42%	37%	5%	4%	5%	3%	4%	TEACHER
83	48%	34%	6%	5%	2%	4%	1%	PARENT
60	65%	27%	2%	3%	0%	2%	2%	ADMINISTRATOR
9	22%	11%	11%	22%	11%	22%	0%	STUDENT
0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	NON-PARENT/PATRON
41	39%	37%	7%	0%	0%	7%	10%	OTHER
10	60%	20%	10%	0%	0%	0%	10%	NOT IDENTIFIED
394	47%	34%	5%	4%	3%	4%	4%	Total

EXHIBIT B: Sample Summary of Opinionnaire Responses and Comments

18 November 1988

M E M O R A N D U M

TO : All Administrators and PDCs

FROM : Dick Clark

SUBJECT : Responses to Fourth Draft of Policy on School-Centered Decision Making and Renewal

I have attached a copy of responses to the "opinionnaire" from approximately 400 staff members and parents. The opinionnaire provides information concerning the extent to which the respondents are polarized on issues as well as a measure of the degree of consensus of the group. Before looking at the numbers of the responses, I would encourage you to read the explanation of the profile report. Information is analyzed in terms of major categories of respondents (that is the school level or district department) and the roles respondents play (for example, teacher, parent). In addition to this summary of responses, I have provided the task force working this policy with verbatim copies of the written comments and suggestions.

Summary of Opinionnaire Responses

The items on the opinionnaire cluster around several major themes. Three of the items allow us to test the general support for the concept of school-centered decision making and renewal. These items indicate a strong agreement among those of you who responded. For example, 92% of you believe that the school community can be trusted to make responsible educational decisions, and 88% of you believe that the school should be viewed as the primary unit of educational change and renewal. Seventy-six percent either agreed or strongly agreed that school renewal is best achieved through school-centered decision making and renewal.

Another general theme is related to issues of power. While you generally perceive that school-centered decision making and renewal increases the power of parents and teachers, you tend to believe that it does not increase the power or principles. You are more apt to believe it increases the power of students than to believe that it does not, but less than half of you hold such a belief.

Another series of questions allows us to understand your beliefs concerning the concept of consensus. You are about equally divided as to whether the policy, as written, provides a clear definition of consensus. You are, also, divided on the issue of whether obstinate members represent a danger to being able to achieve consensus with approximately 52% of you agreeing with the statement related to that topic. Ninety-two percent of you agree or strongly agree with the definition of sufficient consensus contained in the policy draft. Seventy-nine percent of you feel that consensus is the ideal toward which we should be working, and 81% believe the principal should make interim decisions. Sixty-one percent strongly agree or agree that the principal should decide if sufficient consensus exists.

Another major theme in the questions relates to the definition of the model. 82% of you believe that schools should create their own models as it relates to the size and number of groups to be involved. Seventy-eight percent of you agreed that high school students should be involved. Less than 50% strongly agreed or agreed that the parent role is sufficiently clarified, but 85% of you strongly agreed or agreed that community patrons should be appropriately involved. Eighty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that we should not replace principals with committee, and 74% believed that we should leave the implementation to the people responsible once a decision is made. Only 37% of you believed that the latitude given schools to make decisions is clearly stated by the policy.

As you study the responses, you will note that a number of the other items relate to specific wording of various sections of the policy. We will examine all of these themes and the other items closely as we determine what steps to take next.

Summary of Comments

Your written responses to the policy varied from suggested alternative words to individuals who provided us with alternative drafts of a policy. One individual even provided a computer analysis of the language and style in the policy draft. Your comments tend to reveal as much about the status of implementation of the concept of school-centered decision making and renewal as it does about your reactions to the policy. For example, you express concerns about departments being territorial, about the legislature not providing enough money, and about the need for continuing training. However, there were a number of major themes that can be identified in summarizing your written comments.

As has been the case in most discussions, you identified time as a major problem. You indicated that it was difficult to find time to make decisions and commented that time was a problem for community members and administrators as well as for teachers.

Training needs were also commented on by a number of you. You pointed out that more training is needed and that we will have to identify resources that do not detract from our other needs in order to carry out the training.

A number of the items related to individual concerns about ambiguity in the policy draft. In many instances, this appeared not be so much a concern about

the way in which the policy was written as a desire on the part of individuals to have answers spelled out rather than determined by individual buildings. Concern was expressed about a lack of specific ratios for parent and teacher involvement. Some of you stated too much PDC time is being devoted to details which should be handled by administrators. Others of you noted that qualifiers such as "appropriately" or "appropriate" should not be used. For example, you questioned what "appropriate student involvement" is, asserting that students should have substantial involvement rather than appropriate. You also expressed concern about the lack of specificity regarding how much diversity there should be among schools. Others of you commented that the lack of specificity in the policy reflects a lack of courage or vision by the district rather than a necessary accommodation to differences among the buildings and departments.

In a matter related to the issue of ambiguity, several individuals expressed concern that authority was not clearly defined. These individuals believed that administrators should make decisions and the teachers should do what they are told. Sometimes you expressed this by saying administrators should have a clear vision, and teachers implement that vision. Interestingly, some saw the policy as increasing bureaucracy--an ironic outcome of an effort to decrease bureaucraticization.

Many of the comments related to attempts to define consensus and sufficient consensus within the policy. Although the numerical ratings indicated support for the definitions in the policy, a number of you expressed strong feelings about these definitions. Several said that consensus is a concept which either exists or does not--it is not one subject to modification by expressing the idea that a degree of it exists. Written comments were expressed on both sides of the question of use of terms such as "obstinate" in the policy. Some were vigorous in attacking the use of the word, others expressed a belief that something very direct needed to be stated to make it clear that such members needed to be dealt with.

Another area about which there were a number of comments was that of the role of classified personnel and of support services in general. Comments in relation to this theme generally indicated that not enough emphasis on the role of these groups was provided in the policy draft.

A number of people commented on the lack of responses available. Concerns were expressed about funding to train participants in decision-making and to carry out decisions once they have been made. Others worried about the equity of resources in different schools, and a concern was expressed by several over whose resources would be used. Some said that "building" funds should not be used for these purposes. This provides an interesting dilemma if the district is attempting to give the schools more decision-making authority regarding funding.

Several of the comments suggest provisions which are not now contained. For example, it was suggested that decision-making groups at schools should be required to have open meetings. Others reminded us that we need to have clear minutes and records for decision-making groups.

While the numerical responses on the opinionnaire make it clear that there is general support for the concept of school-centered decision making and

renewal, the strong wording of several of the written responses tell us we have work left to do. One person indicated hat "nothing about he policy is clear." Another commentator observed that "the policy cannot be salvaged in its current form." We were told that the policy was verbose, poorly written, redundant, and otherwise of little value.

Our task now is to take into account the comments and the responses from the opinionnaire and continue our work to develop a clear statement of policy about which there is a high degree of consensus. We will be asking you for your opinions again as we continue our efforts.